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U.S. using covert aid in place of sound policy

By James O'Shea

WASHINGTON—Congress will wrestle once again with whether the United States should be in the cloak-and-dagger business of funding covert wars in faraway places.

The debate will focus in upcoming weeks on the Central Intelligence Agency's so-called "secret war" against the Sandinista government in Nicaragua. Last year, Congress voted to provide \$14 million in "covert aid" to 12,000 to 15,000 rebels trying to topple the leftist Sandinistas. The money can't be released, though, unless the Senate and House approve it in votes expected soon.

But that Congress is openly debating the U.S. role in the not-so-secret war against Nicaragua exposes a major gaffe in American national security and foreign policy.

Nicaragua is not the only place in the world where the CIA is supporting covert actions. U.S. money also is pouring into Afghanistan and other nations, some of which are known only by a handful of spy masters.

Yet the debate clearly shows that the Reagan administration and Congress have not determined what role, if any, covert action should play in contemporary policies governing national defense and relations with other countries.

There is no dearth of opinions about the proper role that covert actions should play in U.S. foreign policy.

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They range from left-wing views that all covert actions are evil, to the opinions of conservatives such as Rep. Henry Hyde [R., Ill.], a member of the House Intelligence Committee. Hyde thinks the U.S. should use covert action, though it probably means a few innocent people might be hurt or even killed.

"Nicaragua is not Iowa. Things will happen in a guerrilla war that no one is proud of," Hyde said. "You can't walk through a bad neighborhood with a French poodle. Sometimes you need a Doberman."

Nevertheless, some experts say that U.S. covert actions known to exist seem to flow from ambiguous and contradictory policies hatched in secrecy by a handful of people with few clear objectives.

"Covert action tends to be used as a convenient substitute for policy or ... commitments that the U.S. government has been unable or unwilling to formulate," said Sen. Malcolm Wallop [R., Wyoming], a former member of the Senate Intelligence Committee who wrote recently in the Strategic Review journal that covert aid should be one element of a coherent foreign policy.

But "in a democracy, no action, however covert, ought to be undertaken unless it can be confidently defended in public," Wallop added.

Nowhere is the nonpolicy on covert actions more apparent than in Congress.

On the one hand, many liberal Democrats wince at stories about bands of U.S.-financed mercenaries roaming across nations such as

Honduras and Nicaragua on ill-defined missions, killing friends and enemies alike.

They demand specific information from the CIA on the operations and they are outraged when kept in the dark about operations such as the CIA's role in mining Nicaraguan harbors last year.

Yet many of these same lawmakers actively support millions of dollars more in covert aid for rebels engaged in similar activities in Afghanistan. In recent months, newspaper stories have suggested that enormous amounts of taxpayer money intended for the Afghan rebels has been siphoned off in the covert-aid pipeline. In contrast to the demands for details on Nicaragua, though, few lawmakers have demanded an accounting on Afghanistan.

The situation in Nicaragua is the logical conclusion of the policy vacuum. U.S. policy-makers think they have a moral obligation to oppose what they view as creeping communism, particularly in places where the spark of a resistance movement can be identified.

"After years of guerrilla insurgencies led by communists against pro-Western governments, we now see dramatic and heartening examples of popular insurgencies against communist regimes," Secretary of State George Shultz told the Senate Foreign Relations Committee last week.

Incorporating this philosophy into U.S. foreign policy would be very difficult, because of the hard decisions that would have to be made, and the implications of those choices around the world.

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The easiest way out is the secret way, a covert operation. That allows action in the absence of a clear policy and ideally avoids any messy public debates.

From its beginning, according to supporters and opponents of aid to the contra fighters, the goals of the CIA aid have been unclear. When Congress originally provided money for the contras, the CIA said it was needed to interdict weapons flowing from Nicaragua to leftists fighting the nearby government of El Salvador. As U.S. money flowed in, the contras grew in number to their current strength of about 13,000.

But it subsequently became clear that the U.S.-supported contras were trying to overthrow the Sandinista government, particularly after the CIA got caught helping mine Nicaragua's harbors and producing a guerrilla warfare manual that was a blueprint for toppling the Managua government, according to Rep. Lee Hamilton (D., Ind.), chairman of the House Intelligence Committee.

Support in Congress for continuing funding eroded, particularly as last year's election neared, and Congress refused to provide the Reagan administration with \$28 million it wanted for the contras. Instead, lawmakers approved \$14 million for the contras, but said the money couldn't be spent until Congress voted to release the funds.

For the last six months, about 13,000 armed rebels have been wandering around Nicaragua, a country with a population of about 2.9 million. That's like having

100,000 armed mercenaries wandering around the U.S.

The results have not been particularly favorable. U.S. allies in the region, such as Honduras, are starting to wonder what will happen if Congress refuses to release the money. Most observers expect the administration to lose the vote for the money. The contras already use Honduras as a base, and Honduran officials fear this rebellious and well-armed group of migrants.

Even in the best of times, the CIA apparently has struggled to maintain control over the contras. In a letter to lawmakers last year, CIA director William Casey said the agency helped produce the guerrilla warfare manual after agents heard of contras attacking common citizens.

Some of the attacks were brutal, according to statements accompanying a lawsuit challenging U.S. policy in Nicaragua. For example, many Nicaraguans recounted attacks on their homes by contras. One woman, Odili Moncada de Espinoza, told of a 2½-hour contra attack on her village.

After the attack, she emerged from hiding at her mother's home to look for her son and husband.

"I came out immediately and was told that 15 townpeople had been murdered and among them was my son, Luis Alberto. They also told me the counter-revolutionaries had kidnaped my husband. I went looking for my son and I found him—a corpse over a barricade. A grenade had killed him," she said.

Some of the tales are propaganda floated as the vote on funding the contras draws closer. Even opponents of more money to the contras, such as Sen. David Durenberger (R., Minn.), chairman of the Senate Intelligence Committee, discount some of the stories.

But the indecision, the horror stories and the lack of a clear goal have taken a toll. Even supporters of the aid confess they don't know what to do about the money. Hyde said he favors giving it to the contras, but he points out that it no longer is covert aid.

"Covert aid ought to be covert aid," he said, "and this is the least covert I've ever experienced." Some have suggested that the U.S. simply aid the contras overtly, especially because many opponents to the aid are against it simply because it is covert.

But as Hyde pointed out, that presents difficult problems. "We can't support them overtly because that is an act of war. We simply can't do that without bringing in all sorts of difficulties."

So Congress is wrestling with other solutions, such as pressuring U.S. allies in the region to provide money to the contras in return for additional U.S. aid.

Though none of these questions has been resolved, it is clear that Congress and the CIA have yet to learn what Rep. Les Aspin (D., Wis.), chairman of the House Armed Services Committee, called a basic lesson.

Covert actions, he said, are not like defective automobiles. "Once sold, they can rarely be recalled."